

Mental Illness Awareness Week opportunity for education

Area groups looking to break down stigma through knowledge and support

By **STEPHANIE THIESSEN**

The Champion

A mental illness can strike anyone at anytime. That statement is as true in Halton as it is elsewhere in the world.

Illnesses like depression, bi-polar disorder, schizophrenia and anxiety disorder can wreak havoc on lives when left untreated. But with the proper help, sufferers can lead productive, fulfilling lives. In fact, you probably wouldn't even know they have a mental illness unless they tell you.

"Most people on their medications function just fine," said Peter Croxall, program leader, mental health unit at Oakville-Trafalgar Memorial Hospital. He compared people with mental illnesses to diabetics who can lead normal lives as long as the diabetes is carefully monitored. "But it's a chronic, lifelong illness. If you have one (episode) you're much more likely to have another."

This week is Mental Illness Awareness Week. Since 20 per cent of the Canadian population is likely to experience a mental illness at some point in their lives, this week provides an opportunity for education and, in Milton, to answer the question, "Where do I go for help?"

The week is put on by the Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health, which is made up of 15 member organizations.

Seeking help for a mental illness can make the difference between leading a productive life and falling apart.

Unfortunately, in Halton, there aren't enough resources to deal with our burgeoning population, Mr. Croxall said. He said that on a per capita basis, Halton Region receives less provincial funding for mental illness than most other communities in Ontario.

"The number of people has grown in Halton, but the funding hasn't grown," he said. "The services haven't followed (the population growth)."

People who suspect they're dealing with mental illnesses should go to their family doctor, Mr. Croxall said, who can refer patients to Oakville-Trafalgar Memorial Hospital's services.

"The route to get help is through your family doctor," he said.

Oakville-Trafalgar has a 22-bed adult in-patient unit as well as a day hospital where sufferers come in for about six weeks of education and support in a wide range of programs, Mr. Croxall said.

The hospital also has a small out-patient counselling service and a crisis service.

"If someone ends up in emergency, we have psychiatric nurses available part of the day who do an initial screening and decide what to do," he said.

Mr. Croxall said it's best that Milton patients go straight to Oakville-Trafalgar in emergency situations, since Milton District Hospital is limited in what it can provide.

Oakville-Trafalgar also offers a number of programs to support people long-term who suffer from mental illnesses, as well as a child and adolescent in-patient, 10-bed psychiatric unit and a small out-patient child and adolescent unit.

Unfortunately, Mr. Croxall said, there's a waiting list of about a couple of weeks for an initial assessment at Oakville-Trafalgar.

Joseph Brant Memorial Hospital in Burlington also provides a small in-patient unit and intensive case management program.

Another source of help is the North Halton Mental Health Clinic on Main Street, which is operated by the Region of Halton.

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PETER CROXALL

Patients can refer themselves or be referred by their family doctors.

It provides small out-patient services including psychiatric assessment and consultation, counselling, follow-up care after hospital discharge and support and education programs.

"We provide support services for some of the most vulnerable people in the North Halton community," said manager Charlene Winger.

It also provides services to people with a dual diagnosis, meaning they suffer from a developmental delay as well as a mental illness or other issues such as substance abuse.

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The clinic recently received word that additional funding was coming its way from the federal government. That will hopefully mean people won't have to wait as long — the current wait is three months — to see someone at the clinic, Ms Winger said.

"It's a very exciting time, but of course it's never enough," Ms Winger said. "The region remains under-funded."

For an appointment, call (905) 693-4240.

Secondary support services in the area include the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), which has its Halton head office in Milton Mall. The organization offers one-on-one support programs plus a variety of group support programs across Halton. For some of its groups, it trains volunteer leaders who themselves have dealt with a mental illness.

Executive director Diane Doherty said the association gets its share of callers in crisis situations, and it directs them to the proper help channels.

"We refer them to help for a crisis, and after that's past, we work with the follow-up," Ms Doherty said.

For more information about CMHA, call (905) 693-4270.

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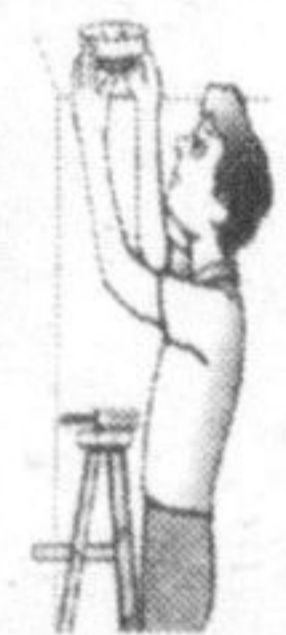
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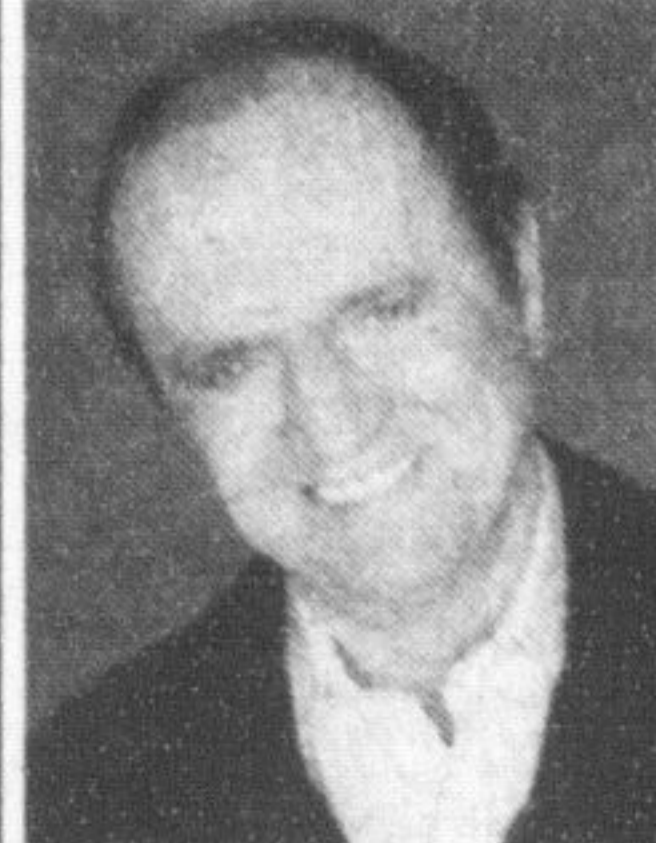
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